

The Contribution of StoryWeaver in Keeping Indigenous Languages Alive

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Abstract

StoryWeaver, an open access digital content platform from Pratham Books has catalyzed the creation of quality reading materials for children in indigenous and mother tongues. These reading materials are useful resources for literacy development and serve as the much needed link between the home language and the medium of instruction in school. The platform's open licensing model has synergized efforts of indigenous communities, linguists, language enthusiasts, educationists and translators in creating resources in indigenous languages hitherto underrepresented in the mainstream. StoryWeaver's innovative model of combining technology, open licensing and collaboration has contributed to preserving the linguistic diversity of indigenous communities.

Keywords: StoryWeaver, indigenous languages, children's literature

Résumé

प्रथम बुक्स के ऑनलाइन पठन सामग्री मंच स्टोरीवीवर ने देशीय और मातृभाषाओं में बच्चों के लिए गुणवत्तापूर्ण सामग्री का सृजन किया है। कहानी पुस्तक के रूप में इन पठन सामग्रियों ने साक्षरता को बढ़ावा देते हुए, पठन आनंद को बढ़ाकर घरेलू और विधिवत शिक्षा की भाषाओं के बीच की कड़ी का काम किया है। प्लैटफॉर्म के ओपन लाइसेंसिंग मॉडल ने मुख्यधारा में आने वाली देशी भाषाओं में कहानियाँ रचने और प्रकाशित करने के विभिन्न भाषाई समुदायों, भाषाविदों, भाषा शिक्षाविदों और अनुवादकों के कार्य को गति दी है। स्टोरीवीवर की साझेदारी ने कई समुदायों की भाषाई विविधता को संरक्षित करने में योगदान दिया है साथ ही दूरवर्ती क्षेत्रों में भी बच्चों की साक्षरता को बढ़ावा दिया है।

Introduction

Languages are intrinsically linked to culture and central to the identity of communities. They are of strategic importance for people with implications for identity, communication, social integration and development. Language supports cognitive processes required for learning. It is estimated that 96 per cent of the world's approximately 6,700 languages are spoken by only 3% of the world's population. Even as indigenous peoples constitute less than 6% of the global population, they speak more than 4,000 of the world's languages. It is believed that more than half of the world's languages will become extinct by 2100 (The United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, 2018).

For indigenous communities, languages are central to their identity, the preservation of their cultures, worldviews, visions and an expression of self-determination. With globalization and the rise of a small number of culturally dominant languages, indigenous languages are increasingly under threat and no longer transmitted by parents to their children (ibid). While a few hundred languages have a legitimate presence in the public domain and the digital world, a majority of the languages are fading without being given any space for exposure, growth and nurturance.

International agencies have drawn attention to the critical loss of indigenous languages and the urgent need to protect, revitalize and promote linguistic, cultural diversity and multilingualism.

StoryWeaver (<https://storyweaver.org.in/>) is an online content platform from Pratham Books that has its roots in promoting access to reading materials for children. 173

Pratham Books is a not-for-profit children's book publisher based in India that seeks to address the critical shortage of reading materials for children in mother tongues by publishing high quality, low cost storybooks to promote reading acquisition. StoryWeaver was launched with the idea that by openly licensing a large repository of children's storybooks and by providing simple digital tools, it would allow users to translate or version the books into new languages and forms, and enable the creation of more books, thereby having greater scale and impact. All content on the platform is available under the Creative Commons license – CC BY 4.0 that allows use, reuse and remixing of the material. The platform can be accessed on desktops, laptops, and mobile devices and its interface is simple, intuitive, and non-bandwidth intensive. All the content on StoryWeaver is Unicode compliant which makes it discoverable, accessible and interoperable.

StoryWeaver has Helped Address the Dearth of Children's Literature in Indigenous Languages

Education through the medium of a dominant language creates pedagogic and psychological barriers for children from indigenous communities. Often dominant languages are learned by children at the cost of displacing the mother tongue. As a result, children's linguistic repertoire in the mother tongues diminishes as they take on the linguistic and cultural traditions of the dominant language, contributing to the disappearance of linguistic diversity. The education system at large is ill-equipped to use multilingualism as a resource. Further, the lack of access to a wide variety of children's books in mother tongues severely limits meaningful participation of

children, communication and expression.

StoryWeaver has catalyzed the creation of quality reading materials for children in indigenous languages that are largely ignored by mainstream publishers. StoryWeaver's innovative model has as its core a large repository of high quality, openly licensed storybooks from publishers such as Pratham Books, Book Dash, Room to Read and others, which can be read online, offline or printed and used. Users can also translate and the original content into new languages and this has led to a huge amplification of books for children especially in minority and indigenous languages. The model is predicated on the fact that there is a huge shortage of books in mother tongue languages for children and by empowering local actors to participate in the process of translation of original content, the book gap can be narrowed. In just 4 years, StoryWeaver has grown from a repository of 800 storybooks in 24 languages to over 17,000 storybooks in 208 languages, of which 40% are indigenous languages. The books have been read over 11 million times online and offline and the platform is used by 2.2 million users in 150 countries. Every year, StoryWeaver marks International Mother Language Day with Freedom to Read, a campaign to build open hyperlocal digital libraries in mother tongues. Collaborations with a global network of organizations and individuals have ensured the development of reviewed, high-quality books in indigenous languages that were hitherto inadequate or non-existent. Each of these hyperlocal digital libraries encompasses 50 to 100 storybooks and is continually expanding.

Suchana, a non-governmental community organization based in Birbhum district of West Bengal, India has been promoting learning among tribal children through their mother tongues in the early years. Both Santali and Kora have a rich oral tradition but no children's books. Teachers who teach children who speak Santali and Kora are usually completely bereft of resources for early literacy development. Prior to 2014 and the launch of StoryWeaver, they had developed 15 educational resources in these languages. The collaboration with StoryWeaver allowed them to translate 105 books into Santali and 100 into Kora within a short span of two years. All these storybooks are published on StoryWeaver and can be used by others as well. 10,000 copies of 20 titles have been printed and distributed to government schools, pre-schools and other organizations in the region. Both the print and digital books are incorporated into their mobile library programme which reaches around 3000 children in 25 villages and formal schools and pre-schools. These efforts have resulted in children having access to a range of books in their languages, including bilingual ones that help them to transition from their mother tongues into Bengali, the state language.

QwertyWorks, a for-profit translation enterprise based in Manila, Philippines has been translating and distributing books in the local community centres since 2001. Most storybooks, both for adults and children in the country are in the official language, English. The few books that are available in native languages are not affordable. Most children go through the schooling process without ever having read books in their mother tongues. Although Cebuano speakers constitute about one-fifth of the population of the Philippines, it is little used as a literary language, with a dearth of children's literature. Through

QwertyWorks' partnership with StoryWeaver, 43 books were translated into Cebuano-Cebu. The books were also distributed through Libreo.ph, an online portal and Facebook. During the pilot project, the books were digitally printed and distributed to 30 day care centers benefitting around 1200 children. These were the first ever books that these children had access to in their own language.

Korku is a tribal language spoken in the regions of Vidarbha in Maharashtra and Khandwa in Madhya Pradesh, India by nearly 200,000 people. Unnati Institute for Social and Educational Change (Unnati ISEC) has been working in the district of Akola, Maharashtra with children from the Korku community for the last five years. Korku children face a tremendous language disadvantage in schools where the medium of instruction is Marathi. Unnati ISEC is working to foster an inclusive culture within the school where the child's language and culture are reflected in the curriculum, books and pedagogy. Prior to their collaboration with StoryWeaver, they had published around 100 books in Korku and Marathi in a very time consuming manner. The partnership with StoryWeaver added 100 new storybooks in Korku. Printouts of the storybooks are used in libraries and classrooms as these schools do not have the necessary infrastructure to read books digitally. The books have certainly created the joy of reading for children who were otherwise deprived of reading material in their mother tongue.

Pawari is a tribal language spoken in Maharashtra with around 360,000 speakers. Children who speak Pawari learn in Marathi, which is the medium of instruction and often find it difficult to understand the concepts being taught. An educator, Amit Dudave has been working towards making storybooks available in Pawari. He has translated 26 storybooks into Pawari which are being used in schools in the region.

StoryWeaver has Facilitated the Revitalization of Indigenous Languages and Building of a Strong Cultural Identity for Participation in Cultural and Social Processes

For indigenous peoples whose languages are steeped in oral history and storytelling since time immemorial, it forms the basis of their cultural identity. There is a growing recognition among indigenous communities, practitioners and policy makers for the need for revitalizing indigenous languages.

In most African countries, indigenous languages are relegated to home and local interactions. The mediums of instruction at school remain the dominant or official languages. Although children have access to books in schools, there are very few high quality reading materials in the indigenous languages. The African Libraries and Information Associations and Institutions (AfLIA) pursues the interests of library and information services in 28 countries in Africa and have the promotion of the mother tongue as a primary agenda. As part of StoryWeaver's Freedom to Read campaign, AfLIA organized a series of translation workshops, where more than 200 books were translated in Ewe, Fante, Hausa, Igbo, Isixhosa, Kikuyu, Luganda, Swahili and Yoruba. The translated books are being used in the continent-wide reading promotion 'Read Africa Read' where the same 174 books are read in different languages across different

countries. Individual libraries have been using the storybooks for their story hours and literacy sessions for out-of-school children and adults.

Chinyanja/Chichewa which is widely spoken in Malawi, Zambia and Mozambique lacks children's books. Writer, translator, editor and poet, Agnes N.S. Nyendwa has been translating books into her mother tongue, Chinyanja. Most children who speak Chinyanja at home do not have adequate reading resources that help them develop fluency in the language. 45 titles from StoryWeaver have been translated into this language.

S'gaw Karen is spoken by over 200,000 people in Thailand. There is a scarcity of books in this language, which is predominantly an oral language. The Asia Foundation is an international non-profit that helps societies work towards a peaceful, just, and thriving region. Their focus has been on creating quality reading resources in indigenous languages in Asia through technology initiatives, translations and content creation. Their Let's Read! digital platform is designed to create and adapt open-access books into any number of languages, quickly increasing the number of relevant and high-quality children's storybooks available. Through community workshops, publishers, authors, editors and technologists have come together to create engaging content in national and indigenous languages in digital format. There are about 256 different versions of StoryWeaver books available in 9 languages on the Let's Read! platform. The books are freely available for anyone to use on the platform, an Android reader application, or to be printed for non-digital use.

In an effort to give a voice to tribal cultures that do not find adequate representation in mainstream discourses, Pratham Books partnered with Ignus Educational Resource Guild (Ignus ERG), an educational resource group to create the Adikahani series of storybooks. A set of 10 tribal stories and 4 song cards authored and illustrated by tribal communities in four tribal languages spoken in Odisha, India— Juanga, Kui, Munda and Saura were developed. These storybooks were published on StoryWeaver and are being used in schools where Munda and Kui children study.

Surjapuri is a minor language spoken in pockets of Bihar, West Bengal, Assam in India and Bangladesh by 1.2 million people. Unfortunately, there are no books in this language and a real possibility of the language being lost as most people speak Hindi. The Azad India Foundation (AIF) has been working towards improving the health and educational status of marginalized women, adolescents and underserved children of Kishanganj district in Bihar. A total of 100 books developed by AIF are now being used in the 75 learning centers run by the organization. Creating a hyperlocal library on StoryWeaver has helped the children have access to and preserve Surjapuri as their language.

Toto is an oral language with no script and spoken only in a village called Totopara in Alipurduar in West Bengal, India. Under a project called the Study and Research of Indigenous and Endangered languages of India of the Jadavpur University, efforts were made to create a storybook on StoryWeaver to document the language.

StoryWeaver has Supported the Creation of Local Publishing Models for Indigenous Children's Literature

The publishing space for indigenous literature in general and children's literature in particular has been diminishing. For the most part, indigenous publishing across countries remain isolated, underfunded and away from the mainstream marketplace. StoryWeaver has opened up the possibilities of supporting mechanisms for communities to showcase indigenous writing and translations, and fill a void in materials for children, and to further the development of indigenous children's literature. The development of the translation based publishing practices has been fuelled by the increasing demand for authentic storybooks for children in their languages. Several innovative publishing models have emerged as a result of collaborations with StoryWeaver.

StoryWeaver's translation sprint process accelerates the creation of local language reading resources for children. It involves a two day workshop that brings together translators to translate, review and digitally publish storybooks for children in a chosen language or languages on StoryWeaver.

Gondi is an indigenous language spoken by a tribal population of over 2.7 million adivasis across seven states in India. It is marked by an absence of a standard lexicon and is heavily influenced by the state language. Since 2014, groups working with Gondi communities have come together to preserve their language and culture. With support from Microsoft Research India and CGNet Swara, they were exploring the possibilities of taking the language online. In September 2018, in StoryWeaver's Gondi translation workshop, StoryWeaver worked with 20 Gondi speakers from three states and translated storybooks from Hindi to Gondi. Around 250 storybooks were translated and contributed towards building a repository of books for future generations of children from the Gond community. Additionally, the translated text also served as inputs for building a Gondi machine translation tool. Through volunteer efforts several of these books have been printed and distributed to children in Bastar, Chattisgarh.

The Sub-Saharan Publishers is an indigenous Ghanaian publisher that specializes in African literature and children's books. They have published three storybooks from their popular Fati series on StoryWeaver in English and northern Ghanaian languages, namely, Dagaare, Dagbani and Sisali. The universal appeal of the stories has resulted in translations in multiple African languages and non-African languages.

Although Uganda has over 65 indigenous languages, none of these languages are official except for English and Kiswahili. There are very few books available in the indigenous languages for both instruction and pleasure reading. The Uganda Christian University (UCU) aims to support early literacy initiatives by making quality multilingual storybooks freely available to the local communities. Students of the creative writing course at UCU have created, translated and published 340 storybooks in 15 languages on StoryWeaver. UCU has facilitated the printing of selected titles and parents, authors and faculty members are encouraged to share these stories on Facebook, Whatsapp, downloads on mobile phones and tablets. So far 3000 copies of storybooks have been printed for distribution to community libraries, schools and children. As a result of the collaboration, storybooks are now available in

languages such as Acholi, Ateso, Kumam, Kinyarwanda, Lango, Luganda, Lumasaaba, Lusoga, Rufumbira and Runyoro.

Numerous indigenous languages in Mexico are on the verge of disappearance. In most indigenous communities, children no longer speak their mother tongue. Bilingual education is not effectively practiced in educational settings due to lack of appropriate training of teachers and resources. Alfredo Harp Helu Foundation has been supporting initiatives to promote language preservation and culture in Mexico. Using the StoryWeaver platform, 122 storybooks from Spanish have been translated to 11 indigenous languages such as Chatino, Chocholeco, Huave, Mixe, Mixteco, Nahuatl, Popti', Tarahumara, Triqui, Zapoteco and Zoque. Storybooks in Chocholeco, a highly endangered language with only 200 speakers are the first written texts in the language in over a decade. Translations in these languages have been carried out by teachers, linguists and translators and are available on the website www.colmix.org. Efforts are on to integrate the storybooks with the Endless OS, an open source operating system provided on low cost computers to schools. The Chatino and Mixe books are being used in the printed form to promote reading among children.

Conclusion

StoryWeaver's model of collaborative content creation which relies on a core of openly licensed quality content and uses technology to facilitate the process for translations is contributing to preserving the linguistic diversity of indigenous communities. Its open frameworks have synergized the efforts of civil society groups, linguists, language enthusiasts, educationists and translators in documenting and creating storybooks in languages hitherto underrepresented in the mainstream. Storybooks developed and published on StoryWeaver have been the first children's books published in some of these indigenous languages. In some cases, these have been the first ever reading material published in the indigenous language. Several of the indigenous languages that are on the platform have a digital presence for the first time as well.

The translation sprint model has been optimally used to create hyperlocal libraries in indigenous languages. StoryWeaver partners have worked around to address the challenges related to using a script and appropriate expression in the indigenous languages. An important spin off has been the development of capacities of indigenous community members to become authors and publishers capable of reclaiming their language.

StoryWeaver has facilitated the development of early reading bilingual resources in several tribal languages to express tribal identities and aid transition of the tribal child towards the language of instruction. These storybooks have facilitated children to have a deeper emotional connect with the material leading to more authentic learning experiences. The storybooks with their simple, creative and child friendly content have proven to be useful resources in early grade classrooms. Teachers, both indigenous and non-indigenous, find these books contextual, culturally sensitive and appropriate for teaching early grades.

Moreover, indigenous communities feel that the availability of content in their mother tongue both in

digital and print formats has given their language a sense of legitimacy and pride. While the majority of the storybooks developed by the partners have been translations, the platform has given impetus to create books from and about the community as well. The unprecedented scale in the access to material in one's mother language realized through StoryWeaver will continue to inspire communities to access and create relevant content for children in the years to come.

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